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AUTHOR Katz, Lilian G.
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ABSTRACT

While forecasting what the sociopolitical climate will be like in the year 2000 is extremely hazardous, it is possible to discuss some long term societal trends and to offer a personal list of items that, it is hoped, will be on the agenda for education. Long term trends which will probably continue to influence society include the increasing similarity of the sexes, particularly in such areas as child rearing functions and responsibilities, the increasing sophistication of children, and the steady raising of criteria for what constitutes the "good life." Education in the year 2000 can also be approached by formulating answers to questions of what will then be conceivable, possible, feasible, practical, and desirable. However, these answers are amorphous due to our lack of knowledge about future conditions and are highly individual because they are colored by our personal values. A list of desirable agenda items for education includes (1) the quality of life as a focal variable, (2) assessment of children on a measure of thriving, (3) emphasis on aesthetics, (4) development of interethnic and interracial harmony, (5) emphasis on the development of social competence, (6) development of interest in something outside of the self, (7) parent participation in child care, and (8) improvement of public understanding of child development and education. (CB)

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The Young Child in the Year 2000: Setting the Professional Agenda*

Lilian G. Katz, Ph. D.
ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois

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I. Introduction

No doubt there are many ways to enter into a discussion about the turn of the next century. I find the forecast assignment a troubling one mainly because it seems to me that one can only forecast future events or phenomena in the light of what one already knows.

At the last turn of the century it would have made sense to forecast that by 1950 every American family would have two horse-drawn carriages in its stable, and that the number of miles travelled by train by the average American would be in the tens of thousands! The problem here is that one can only make forecasts in terms of what one already knows; and it is very likely that significant developments in the aspects of life that our professional agenda should address will be affected a great deal by what we do not yet know, (as well as by some that we do know).

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I will readily admit that when Rich Weinberg reminded me that the year 2000 is no further from us that the year 1968 it helped put the assignment into perspective. But - could we or would we have predicted in 1968 that a United States President would within a half-a-dozen years be compelled by events to resign from the presidency of this great nation? So much for predicting the socio-political climate of the future!

II. Looking at Trends

Perhaps what one most needs in exercises of this kind is the knowledge of history and the concepts of historians. That is to say, we may be best able to talk about the future in terms of continuing trends detected in the distant past, detectable at present and therefore highly likely to continue in the future.

1. Increasing Similarity of the Sexes.

One such trend of interest that I would guess is likely to continue is the increasing similarity of the two sexes. That is to say that it is most likely historically the case that males and females have been

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becoming more and more alike, let us say over the last 1500 years at least. This no doubt varies as a function of both complexity and modernity of a given society.

Certainly in the area of child rearing functions and responsibilities, males and females are increasingly alike, with an acceleration in this direction of the last ten or fifteen years. It seems reasonable to assume that this trend will continue around the world. Should we be alarmed or pleased by this trend? What are its implications for the outcome of childrens' development? One implication that I often worry about is that as education and training for women increases, child rearing and child care (as a job) will become even more under-stimulating than it now is. Perhaps this potential danger will be mitigated by the increasing participation of fathers in child rearing. But what can be done to help child care workers to want to continue in that occupation?

Another trend which impinges on child rearing and its increasing stressfulness (versus satisfaction) is the decreasing number of children makes the fear of failure somehow more acute. If one have seven or eight children, a few failures or 'ne're-do-goods', a few normals, and one or two outstanding successes can be achieved relatively easily. But with only one or two children parents are putting all of their eggs into very few baskets; the weight may be too much for the offspring to bear, and the fear of failure may be excessive for the parents.

Along these lines another trend likely to continue is that as the family continues to be potentially the source of the greatest good - in the form of nurturance, protection, encouragement, socialization in general, etc., so in the same proportion, when it fails in its mission it is potentially the source of the greatest damage. All of which suggests that services aimed at supporting and helping parents will continue to be needed, even though it isnot yet very clear how the services and supports are best offered.

2. Sophistication of children.

Another trend, which we can really only guess at, seems to be the increasing amount and variety of stimulation to which young children are exposed, leading to the increasing "worldiness" (versus innocence) of children. It is not clear however whether childrens' capacities to deal with this greater variety and rate of stimulation has also developed. What psycho-educational needs stem from this particular aspect of the child's present and future environment? It seems clear that the child's environment is an increasigly complex one which is more and more difficult to understand. Education's traditional role in helping the young understand as well as function in the world around them will simply be a bigger, more complex and more urgent and probably more frustrating one.

There is a lot of talk about the extent to which the adult world of those who are now the very young will be an ultra hi-tech one. The case can be made that the more likely it is that adulthood will be

dominated by hi-tech, the more important it is to get a lot of rich experience with low-tech in the early years. Parenthetically, I find it interesting that the salespersons of early hi-tech rationalize the great value of computers for young children on the basis of the fact that (a) computers are interactive, (b) the children can work together in small groups and help each other with debugging, etc., and (c) the children have 'control' over their own learning! Is this rationale the beginning of a general movement to resurrect John Dewey? How is it that the importance of these three elements of pedagogy were widely scoffed at before microcomputers were being sold??

It is also often said that children are simply more intelligent (earlier in life) than they used to be. Thus one item on our agenda must be to modify our educational institutions to take this gradual change in the characteristics of its pupils into account.

It has been said that every generation speaks of the next one as being careless, lacking in discipline, softer (self-indulgent) than their elders, and so forth. Perhaps this has always in fact been the case. Perhaps it is indeed true that each generation tolerates or accepts a wider range of behavior than the last one. If so, what will be the acceptable or tolerable range of behavior in 2000?

We were asked to comment generally on the impact of the environment in the year 2000. While prediction is difficult, it is probably a good idea to remember that the important thing in determining the course of development is not the environment or phenomena around the child per se or even her actual experiences, but the meanings that child puts on them. If we just consider father-absence (paternal deprivation) as an example, the meanings children put on this phenomenon vary. If the child thinks her father is absent because he is off fighting bravely in the war to end all wars, etc. then his absence may be a source of reflected glory. If she believes his absence is because he does not like being with her, or because he is in jail for a serious crime, etc. a different developmental outcome can be expected, even though the phenomenon of absence is exactly the same in all cases. The problem, then, is to determine what meanings children give to relevant experiences, and to help them to assign more appropriate, accurate and 'healthy' meanings, as necessary.

3. The criteria of the 'good life'.

The programmatic efforts known under the general rubric of 'equal opportunity' really refer to equal opportunity for the 'good life'. One of the trends notable over human history is that the criteria by which we decide what consitutes a 'good life' are constantly being revised upwards. Using Merton's concept of relative deprivation, we can see that the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's lot is a function of the standards or criteria with which we compare it. Inasmuch as these standards are always being raised, the amount of dissatisfaction is likely to remain fairly constant.

Another approach to discussing the year 2000 is to try to formulate answers to the following questions:

What is conceivable?
What is possible?
What is feasible?
What is practical? What is actual?
What is desirable?

We can look at each one in turn and see where it takes us.

1. What is conceivable?

Answers to this question have no limits other that those of our mental capacities to deal with whatever information is at hand. Let us begin with an attempt to conceive of what the environment - in all its aspects - would be like if whatever we mean by education were totally successful. What would be true that is not true now? Instead of having a parphiet entitled "A Nation At Risk", what would we title the description of success? It not so easy to sketch out fully what our daily lives would look like, what we would be doing, thinking, feeling, etc, if all our educational efforts were successful.

As soon as one tries to 'conceive' of such a state as would (theoretically) be created by the total success of whatever we agree to include in the term education, the products seem somewhat absurd. Would all our citizens be either doctors, lawyers, engineers, or computer scientists? (Would everyone be above average?!!) How could any citizen in such a case end up as a bus driver? Although it is difficult to conceive of it, such jobs may not exist in 2000! How would someone end up as an attendant in a home for the care of the aged (the latter by then constituting a much larger proportion of the U. S. population than they do now)? Would not such a lowly job be taken only by those whom the educational establishment has failed? What indeed are our criteria of educational effectiveness? Perhaps the search for answers to this and related questions concerning what education (at every level) is really all about should be on our professional agenda very soon.

Let us suppose that one of the areas of great advancement in the next decade will be in neurobiology/neuropsychophysiology, and that our advancement takes us to where we can be certain - say 99%- that children will learn what we teach them! Now the problems of education become very serious. We would have virtually solved the pedagogical and methodological problems, but now would have to take very seriously the question of what should be learned, and who decides the answers and how are differences in those answers to be recorciled? The responsibility would become awsome.

2. What is possible?

Formulating answers to this question is no easier than to the previous one. My main point is raising this one is to suggest that if we put plans on our professional agenda that are too far outside of the realm of possiblity (e. g. all children should be excellent!), we are likely to increase the sense of failure above and beyond the level we already have it. In other words, one parameter to keep in mind in the development of the agenda for the year 2000 is its achievability.

3. What is feasible?

In order to address this question we need some reliable information about what resources are likely to be required as well as available. We also need to know what sources of resistance to the agenda are likely to appear.

4. What is practical?

Answers to this question must be derived from a question not listed here, namely What is actual? Since we do not know what is actual in the year 2000, it is difficult to know what will be practical. Plausible answers to the question of what is practical in the year 2000 may be quite different from those we would formulate concerning what is practical today.

5. What is desirable?

At first glance this looks like the easiest of the questions to answer. After all, it is unlikely that what will be desirable at the turn of the century would be very different from what seems desirable to us today. The major problem with this question is that it cannot be answered by data, research or theory; its answers lie in the realm of values, morals and ethics - all areas in which there are (in democracies like ours at least) no experts. However, each of us is free to enter her own version of what is desirable into the competition for a hearing, and in this sense the question can be addressed.

IV Some agenda Items for the Next Decade

1. The Quality of Life as a Focal Variable

First it is useful to remember that all lives have quality - some high, some low and some presumably inbetween. But one of the projects that I would like to see on our agenda is the search for agreement on what is the optimum quality of life for our children. At present I think that useful indices include (a) health status (and basic medical care available for all U. S. children free by 2000); (b) feeling connected, attached, cared about, having a stake in the welfare of others, etc.,; (c) feeling that life is worth living, satsifying and interesting.

2. Assessment of Children in on a Measure of Thriving.

I would like to see us assess each child in terms of the extent to which he or she is thriving, or developing well, throughout the long period of childhood. (See Katz, Assessing Preschoolers' Development, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Educatio, University of Illinois. 1984) This another approach to the assessment of the Quality of Life. It is not a comparison of children with respect to a distribution of given attributes, but an evaluation of selected indices of the quality of the individual child's life.

3. Emphasis on Aesthetics - Another Index of the Quality of Life

The point has been made elsewhere that the aesthetic dimensions of experience give quality to our lives and thus I see it as major agenda item to look at the aesthetic dimensions of childrens' environment.

4. Development of inter-ethnic and inter-racial harmony

There is now a very good body of research on the development of inter-racial attitudes that should be implemented in all of our social institutions. We need to make a clear commitment to this effort as a nation and as professional educators. There is no time to lose on this matter.

5. Emphasis on the development of social competence.

The current literature on the development of social competence is rich and growing and full of important implications for practitioners. Work on helping practitioners to make good use of this knowledge base should be on our agenda immediately. Along similar lines, I think we should take another good look at the potential advantages of mixed age groups for the development of social competence, as well as for other reasons.

6. Development of interest.

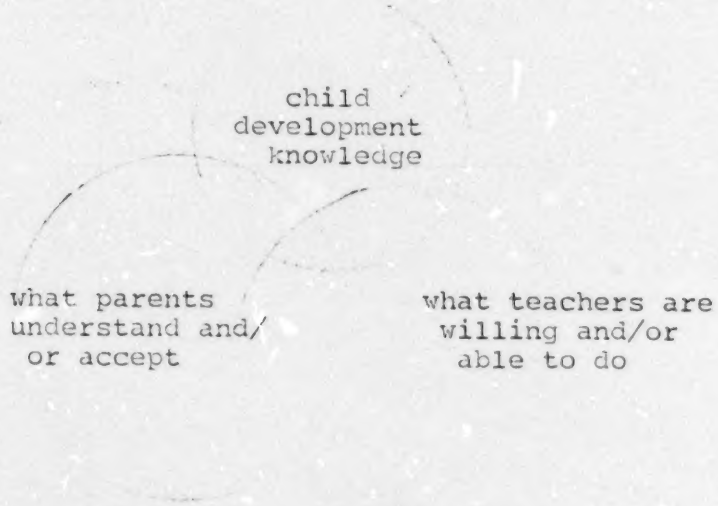
The disposition to be ineterested in selected aspects of the environment, or to be able to lose oneself in something outside of the self should be studied developmentally and become a serious concern of pedagogy and curriculum. The longer the life span, the more important it would seem to be that this capacity is a well developed and robust one.

7. Parent participation in child care

A number of issues faced by child care institutions (adult-child ratio, the relatively low stimulus value of the work, for instance) can be alleviated if employment benefits include the possibility of each parent spending one half-day every two weeks in his/her child's day care center. This practice would also serve to provide parents and children with common content and points of reference to enrich their relationships, and would stimulate the staff and increase the appreciation among parents of their efforts.

8. Improve public understanding of child development and education

When we look at the practice of early childhood education, we are often dismayed by the distance between it and the knowledge base that is now available. I think we can account of this distance as follows: let us put into one circle everything we know about how children develop (some of that knowledge will turn out to be wrong), and in another circle we put what it is that parents understand and or accept concerning what should be done for their early education and development, and in a third circle we put what it is that teachers are willing and/or about to do in early childhood programs, we may something resembling the figure below.



A major item on the present and future agenda is to increase the area of overlap.